

## MORTAL MAN AND ETERNAL TRUTH

Thomas Waldstein

IN THIS GREAT SEASON of Easter, as our Holy Mother the Church exults in the Resurrection of the Lord, the whole of nature seems to reflect her joy. These splendid Californian hills, shrouded with cool mist, blossom with abundant life. They are covered with flowers among which innumerable insects buzz. The birds sing, and the trees rustle in gentle breezes. And all these creatures give a constant illustration of the teaching of the philosopher, that the most natural of all desires is to participate in the eternal and the divine, and all the works of natural things are for the sake of this end.<sup>1</sup> While all other creatures follow this desire blindly, living and bringing forth others like themselves in obedience to it, man only is capable of knowing what he does. Reason, like a divine spark, enables man to reach for what is eternal. But precisely because of this higher participation in the eternal, man is paradoxically the only animal who really has time—the brutes, as Nietzsche has written, are “unhistorical”<sup>2</sup>—they live entirely in the moment. Man’s immortal soul is the form of a mortal body and thus his mind is stretched out, and distended in time.

This distension in time of a thing that shares in the eternal enables man alone of the creatures of this world to have destiny and tragedy. It is beautiful, but it is also sad. *Sunt lachrymae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt.*<sup>3</sup> *tears waken tears, and honour honour brings, and mortal hearts are touched by mortal things*, Aeneas cries out, in a text often quoted by Mr. Ferrier. All of our human life is marked by mortality in the desire for the eternal. My dear classmates, as we look back today on the four years which we have spent here, the great joy of our accomplishment is inevitably touched by a gentle sadness over this time which has passed to return no more.

*Man by nature desires to know,*<sup>4</sup> since knowledge is a participation in the eternal, but even his pursuit of eternal truth is marked by mortality. What a strange creature man is! When we arrived here four years ago, to find the education fitting to the freeman, we were filled with the wonder of our own existence, and we desired to obey the injunction of the Delphic Sybil: *know thyself!* Perhaps we shared something of the adolescent goofiness of Kipling’s hero when he said to himself, *Kim—Kim—Kim—Kim—Kim*. Now four years have past, and we have spent them seeking knowledge from the works of the greatest philosophers of the past. With those philosopher’s we have looked at this strange creature man. We have seen that his mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, which can only become actual by union with intelligible form, which it can only come to through the senses of its mortal body. This mind ardently desires to attain to the first cause of being. All of its knowledge is a union between it and the Being from whom all other beings partake being. This is why we say knowledge is desirable for its own sake: because it is a participation in the Divine itself. Man’s mind cannot rest in the knowledge of participated beings but always seeks to look beyond them to see their cause in itself. The real question for man is thus not the question implied by the command of the Oracle, *who am I?*; but rather the question so beautifully expressed by our patron, St. Thomas, in his first recorded words, when he was a child at Monte Casino: *who is God?* It is this knowledge that we have primarily sought here.

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<sup>1</sup> Vide: *De Anima*, Bk. II, ch. IV; 415b.

<sup>2</sup> Vide: *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Aeneas, Bk. I, 462.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1.

Man's unaided reason can attain in some measure to knowledge of the God through his effects. While this is the most wonderful natural knowledge, and worthy of the name wisdom, it cannot satisfy our minds completely. For, in it we do not behold God's essence as it is in itself, but only insofar as it causes effects which always fall short of it. Thus our knowledge always falls short. Plotinus described well our predicament:

*That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being. If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it, what a shock of delight! [...] But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the "inconceivable beauty" which stays within the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it?*<sup>5</sup>

We cannot fully attain what we glimpse through created effects. We are like the souls which Virgil described on the shores of the river Acheron:

*Stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum  
tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore*<sup>6</sup>

*They stood pleading to be the first ferried across,  
with hands outstretched in desire, in stretched desire for the farther shore.*

But who can ferry us across? In vain we stretch out our hands. At this point human wisdom can take us no farther.

But in our years here we did not study human wisdom primarily, for all our studies were ordered to Sacred Theology: the wisdom which springs from revelation. We used human wisdom as a tool to gaze together at the astonishing surprise which is the Christian faith: *for love does not consist in this that we have loved God, but that God has loved us and has sent us his Son as an expiation for our sins* (1. John, 4:10). The God whom we desperately seek has come to seek us! The inconceivable Beauty has come out of the sanctuary! *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us!* (John, 1:14) The eternal God has taken on our mortal flesh, and by doing so he has transformed it. In this Easter season the Church celebrates in a special way the death and resurrection of our Lord. By His death and resurrection He has broken for us the bonds of sin and death. Our mortal life is transformed into the seed of an immortal life to come. Christ has become our Ferryman so that in His boat, the Church, we can cross over to an eternal life of the vision of God's essence. To strengthen us for the journey he has given us Himself as our food, so that already before we reach the final goal we may become part of his mystical body, and live from His abundant life.

In His incarnation our Lord has revealed to us truths far surpassing the natural power of human reason. This is the wisdom that we have sought in these past four years. Human wisdom we have sought also, because it is good in itself, but mostly because it is helpful for learning Divine wisdom. And we have made a good beginning. We have studied from the works of the greatest masters of human and divine wisdom, and we have been guided in our study by men who have given their lives to understanding the works of those masters. In making a beginning in this wisdom we have also started on what is the true way of following the injunction of the Delphic Sybil. For, as the Second Vatican Council has

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<sup>5</sup> *On Beauty*, ch.7, lines 14-16; ch. 8, lines 1-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Aeneid*, Bk. VI, 313-14.

taught, *Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of His Love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.*<sup>7</sup>

What we have been given in these four years is a great gift, and therefore it is fitting that we give thanks. We give thanks to our parents and benefactors who have, by their hard work and devotion enabled us to receive this gift. What you have given us we cannot repay—may God reward you. We thank the benefactors of the College, the board of governors, the administrators, and the staff of the College who enable it to thrive. May God continue to bless your wonderful work. We thank our tutors who have guided us in our pursuit of truth. You have performed for us the office of true friends—may we one day be reunited. We thank our Chaplains who fed us with the bread of eternal salvation. You have been true fathers to us—may the work you have done bear fruit in eternal life. We thank especially His Excellency Archbishop Migliore who has found time to come to our commencement. Your Excellency's presence here is a sign of our union with the Apostolic Church, and thus a pledge of our union with the will of Christ—thank you for the encouragement which you give us.

*From those to whom much has been given much will be expected.* We who have been given such a good beginning in the pursuit of wisdom must spend the rest of our lives continuing this pursuit. Wherever we find ourselves, whether in another school, or at work, or in the family, or in the monastery or parish, we must seek wisdom. And like our patron, St. Thomas, let us seek it with humility. We who follow the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor let us follow also his example. St. Thomas looked for the truth wherever he could find it—even in the writings of Averoes and Avicenna. Let us not allow the fact that we have been formed in St. Thomas's intellectual custom, lead us to ignore the truth when it is expressed in other ways—for thus we would not be true followers of St. Thomas. We must be open, but let us not fall into a false openness which holds all opinions equal. We must be servants of the truth, and witnesses of it to others. The truth is not given as a private possession to be hoarded, or used as an instrument of pride, but a great common good to be shared in gentleness and love. If we can lead others to this great good we must do so with gentleness and humility, not with overbearing arrogance or contempt.

We have studied the revelation of Christ, we must live by it! *If you remain in my Word, Our Lord tells us, then you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free* (John, 8:31-32). *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* (John, 15:12). Dear classmates, let us not be sluggish in following the Lord, but in whatever state of life we enter let us pour out our lives in love of our neighbor, for the love of God, that our lives may be united to the sacrifice of Christ “an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord.”

My friends, the time has come for us to go our ways. Let us put out into the deep with eagerness and joy. These flowering hills, these singing birds, point to the One Who has already won our victory for us: Christ Jesus who has risen to die no more. All we have to do is to unite ourselves to Him with all our energy and gifts, as he brings his work to perfection. If there is sadness in our parting it is a pledge that we shall be reunited again at **His** wedding feast. Let us call on our Blessed Mother to help us on our way. Today is her feast as our Lady of Fatima, let us entrust ourselves to her Immaculate Heart that we might serve her divine Son with purity and love. *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genetrix.*

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<sup>7</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.